Between 1894 and 1899, the Houdinis learned the craft of showmanship by performing in all these arenas, struggling to make ends meet the whole time. To get bookings, they did a song-and-dance act and appeared in very bad plays. Houdini performed as “Projea, the Wild Man” in an animal cage and did a mind-reading act and onstage séances. . . .

A less determined, less confident man would have given up entirely and taken a job. The closest Houdini came to that was opening a correspondence school for magicians in his mother’s apartment. He offered all his secrets for sale. Luckily, nobody thought the tricks worth buying.

The problem with Houdini’s act was that he hadn’t yet discovered the real Houdini. He performed as “The King of Cards,” “The King of Billiard Balls,” even as “The Paper Tearing King,” without much success. Audiences loved the Metamorphosis escape but did not love Houdini’s magic tricks. He worked constantly to develop new ones. He watched and studied hundreds of other performers to learn showmanship. He improved his grammar and stage speech. Most importantly, he invented brilliant ways to promote the act. But none of his efforts opened the door to stardom.

In 1895, Houdini let audience members handcuff him (with their own handcuffs) as part of Metamorphosis. He escaped. Then he let the police of Gloucester, Massachusetts, lock him in their handcuffs. And he escaped. In Woonsocket, Rhode Island, police and newspaper reporters shackled Houdini with six sets of handcuffs and locked him in a room. He escaped in eighteen seconds.

It was terrific advertising in those relatively small towns, but it went no farther. In the days before national news magazines, radio, and television, Houdini’s escape from police handcuffs in Woonsocket was purely local news. . . .

This passage traces Houdini’s early career and his development as an escape artist.

- What did the Houdinis do during their early career, between 1894 and 1899?
- Which of the Houdinis’ many acts did audiences enjoy the most?
- How did Harry Houdini first start performing with handcuffs?
While playing a Minneapolis hall in the spring of 1899, lightning struck Houdini’s floundering career. Martin Beck, who ran the entire Orpheum vaudeville circuit, liked Metamorphosis and the handcuff escape. He told Houdini to drop the card, billiard ball, and paper-tearing tricks from the act. Beck wanted Houdini to do a twenty-minute turn in the top vaudeville theaters for sixty dollars a week—more than he had ever earned before. Houdini wrote that the offer “changed my whole Life’s journey.”

Like a jewel under a bright light, Houdini responded to attention by revealing brilliant new facets. Now he played only two shows a day, not twelve. He stayed in cities for a week or more, not one night. This gave him the time and the platform to experiment with his act and impress his audience.

This passage describes a turning point in Houdini’s career, when he is hired by Martin Beck to work in top vaudeville theatres.

- Who was Martin Beck?
- What part of Houdini’s act did Beck like? What did he advise Houdini to stop doing?
- How did Houdini’s work schedule change after Beck hired him? How did this allow Houdini to improve his act?
Targeted Passage #3 – lines 91-112

He constantly improved Metamorphosis. He sometimes borrowed a suit jacket from the audience, which he would put on before going into the trunk. After the switch, Bess would emerge wearing the borrowed jacket. Sometimes he took people into the trunk who escaped with him.

Responding to an accusation that he used keys to open handcuffs, Houdini went to a San Francisco police station on July 13, 1899. [His clothes were removed] and examined by a police surgeon who certified that he was hiding nothing. His mouth was taped shut, his wrists and ankles were shackled in ten sets of police handcuffs. For good measure, the ankle cuffs were attached to the handcuffs with an eleventh pair before he was locked into an interrogation room. Five minutes later Houdini walked out, still “n——” (the way most polite newspapers spelled the word naked then), carrying all the cuffs in his hands.

In April 1900, again [unclothed], he took just three minutes to escape from a doubly locked jail cell in Kansas City. He repeated these escapes wherever the police allowed. Each police force added new obstacles, almost desperate not to be embarrassed by this upstart magician. But they always were. And as Houdini knew, the stories written about him by bigcity newspapers were the most valuable and cheapest advertising available.

The public commotion he caused generated massive interest in his stage act and sold tickets. His $60 salary rapidly increased to $250 a week—half the total yearly income of an average American worker.

This passage describes how Houdini became a famous and well-paid performer.

• How did Houdini make his Metamorphosis act even more amazing for audiences?
• How did Houdini prove that he was not cheating in his act with handcuffs?
• Why did Houdini want newspapers to write about him? What happened to his salary as more and more people heard about him?